Catholic homophobia[1]

Gerard Loughlin

Durham University

Corresponding author:

Gerard Loughlin

Email: gerard.loughlin@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Understanding homophobia as a discursively constituted antipathy, this article argues that the culture of the Catholic Church – as constituted through the Roman magisterium – can be understood as fundamentally homophobic, and in its teaching not just on homosexuality, but also on contraception and priestly celibacy. Moreover, in this regard, the article argues for a hermeneutic of continuity from the pontificate of John Paul II to that of Pope Francis – the latter's ambivalence repeating the 'scrambling' of speech that is typical of homophobic discourse.

Keywords

creative amnesia, homophobia, homosexuality, Pope Francis, Joseph Ratzinger, same-sex love

Times have changed. Some 30 years ago, when I first began to think about Catholic theology and sexuality, the matters for discussion were such as the nature and extent of premarital sex – how far could you go? – and the use of 'artificial' contraception by married couples. Although, of course, the fact that contraception allowed unmarried couples to go further than was previously safe was one of the reasons why contraception was resisted. Homosexuality was also discussed, largely in relation to scripture and natural law, in relation to the distinction between being homosexual and practising homosexuality, between a disordered condition and an intrinsic moral evil; a notorious distinction established through the Roman

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Declaration regarding Certain Questions of Sexual Ethics* (1975), and then its *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986).

Thirty years ago, and the Church's opposition to premarital sex, to the use of contraception by both married and unmarried couples, and, of course, to homosexuality, was questioned but also acceptable to many. In 1988 the British parliament passed the Local Government Act, with its now infamous clause 28, banning local authorities from promoting homosexuality, and from the 'teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.[2] But 30 years on, and such oppositions seem at best quaint and at worst immoral. Contraception is widely used, not least by Catholics, with having children viewed as perhaps irresponsible, a selfish act in a world that is far from underpopulated. Marriage now seems of doubtful value, or, if of value, as something one comes to after a number of previous relationships, perhaps when – moral doubts about having children notwithstanding – a couple seeks fulfilment through offspring or the tax benefits accorded married couples. And regarding children, it is also the case that the Church has lost the moral authority it once enjoyed because it has been found not only to have harboured practising paedophiles but to have actively concealed this. And, of course, homosexuality now seems but a variant of sexuality, with same-sex marriage enshrined in law if not yet celebrated in the mainstream Churches. These changes are astonishing, and for many the Church's opposition baffling. But the changes are not to be taken for granted – certainly not the change regarding those identified as homosexual persons. All progress is a regress for someone, all change reversible, often violently. But the change is why the moral question of homosexuality is no longer about its acceptability, but about the Church's opposition to it, about the Church's *homophobia*.

Homophobia

The homophobia in question is not unique to the Church, but in the Church it is given theological weight, a specifically theological destructiveness. As elsewhere, Christian homophobia, Catholic homophobia, is not, or not in the first instance, a matter of psychology. It is rather a matter of culture, of discourse, of disseminated and learned dislike. It is natural in the way that any taught antipathy is natural; natural in the context of a homophobic culture. No child is born homophobic, but becomes so only as it grows into a sociality that establishes its identity against those it is not – that it cannot, must not be – in order to affirm itself. In a

homophobic society, a homophobic Church, the child will learn those language games, starting with the casual insult, that can lead into more violent forms of life – the taunting, the beating, the murder – all of which establish the perpetrators as the other of the disavowed – those who are abjected, beaten, murdered. In the Church, such exclusions are from the family, from the communion, from – indeed – the human. And, in the Church, the language games – taking 'language game' in an extended sense – are, among others, the Roman declaration and letter, the instruction or exhortation, the very forms of discursive power that interest the theologian.

This, at any rate, is one account of why there is homophobia. It is the necessary correlate of an identity – a pattern of expectation and behaviour – that knows itself through knowing what it is not, and because it is negatively constructed, against the abject, it is always anxious about its nature and reality. On this analysis, homophobia is prior to homosexuality, and homophobia is the practice or set of practices – the apparatus – by which the heterosexual person is established as such. And, as we shall see, Catholic homophobia is now the set of practices by which the human person as such is established. Of course, the Christian theologian will also wonder if there are not more deeply embedded reasons within theology itself, in its thinking of the divine as well as the human. For the logic of disavowal is also the logic of hiding in plain view. One thinks, for example, of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Trinity, of the Father fertilizing the Son, and one wonders what might be sequestered there, in such a theological imagining.[3]

The extent of homophobia

As already noted, the theologian will be interested in those explicitly homophobic texts, such as the 1986 letter on the pastoral care of homosexual persons, with its construction of homosexuality as a tendency towards an intrinsic moral evil; the evil is somewhat unspecified, but presumably it refers to the sodomitical act as once castigated – although sodomy was a term that covered a range of activities, including some between men and women.[4] Here, there are two things to note about the letter. The first is that it accepted, and so established for Catholic thought, the homosexual as a personage. The second is the violence of this establishment: homosexual persons are such in virtue of their orientation towards a moral evil. In the 1970s and 1980s, people such as Basil Hume, Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster (1976–99), sought to retrieve some pastoral comfort by arguing that the homosexual condition was in itself morally neutral, and so homosexual persons need

not feel so bad about themselves. But the claim was somewhat disingenuous, and Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, warned against this overly benign interpretation that distracts from what the1975 declaration and 1986 letter have to say about homosexual persons.[5] As James Alison has pointed out, the letter imagines a class of person that not only is oriented to sin, as with original sin, but is oriented to a particular sin, the sin against nature. Homosexuals are doubly bound for sin; a teaching that in some way deforms the doctrine of creation.[6]

David Halperin has argued that homophobia is everywhere, with 'pervasive and multiform strategies' that 'shape public and private discourses', saturating the 'entire field of cultural representation'.[7] And that field includes the Church. We will come back to the 1986 letter and its violence, but first we should note some of the other ways in which Catholic homophobia extends – as discourse and culture – throughout the Church's teaching and sexual practice, for both the Church's refusal of (artificial) contraception and the requirement of celibacy for most of its priests can be understood as inherently homophobic.

The refusal of contraception is the refusal to acknowledge the separation of sex and reproduction in humans and other higher primates. *Humanae Vitae* (1968) asserts that there is an 'inseparable connection, established by God … between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act', the marriage act being penile–vaginal intercourse.[8] But, as most people know, the unitive and procreative is only periodically inseparable in the 'marriage act'. Indeed, it is the natural separation of the unitive and procreative in the human that enables a permitted natural family planning, except that there is nothing very natural about such planning. *Humanae Vitae* is both the denial and advocacy of the unnatural. And, of course, it is another set of natural sexual practices, between members of the same sex, that also gives the lie to the supposed inseparability of sexual bonding and procreation. It is in this way that the refusal of contraception constitutes a homophobic discourse, since it establishes those whose sexual union is not naturally procreative as against nature, against God. Thus the limits of the human are drawn against the homosexual.

But homophobia is also a matter of Christian culture, of Catholic culture. This can seem surprising, for on the face of it there are many aspects of Catholic culture that seem anything but antipathetic to gay sensibilities. The Church has a male-only, same-sex priesthood that, for the most part, abjures marriage and progeny, its members married only to Christ and

fathering only spiritual children. But arguably the sexual practice of priestly celibacy also serves homophobic discourse and culture, for in absenting the members of the institutional Church from sexual intimacy it more securely establishes heterosexual reproduction as the one proper mode of affective sexuality.

Yet it is a perilous security, for the priest may fail in his own practice and succumb to aberrant intimacies. Moreover, the priesthood, in being so resolutely homosocial, must avoid any suggestion of homosexuality by being always more virulently homophobic, externalizing a loathing that for some will be internal, and that for all secures the myth of a natural heterosexuality from which there are only departures and deviations. The sad story of Keith O'Brien, Cardinal Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh from 1985 to 2013, may stand as a proxy for such dissimulation.

Violent homophobia

The 1986 letter harboured another violence. Not only are homosexuals defined by sin, but violence against them is legitimated, though in such a way that this accusation can be refused. Violence is both legitimated and not legitimated. For although there should be no violence against homosexuals, it is nevertheless asserted that no one should be surprised when the granting of rights to homosexuals leads to an increase in violence in general. It will be a natural reaction to the favouring of the unnatural.

> <EX>[T]he proper reaction to crimes committed against homosexual persons should not be to claim that the homosexual condition is not disordered. When such a claim is made and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase. (§10)

The rhetorical move is very similar to that which Judith Butler and others have seen in a later Ratzinger text, the infamous Regensberg address of 2006, in which the practice of quotation allowed the pope to both suggest and deny the inherently violent nature of Islam, a suggestion Benedict denied but mobilized through its repetition.[9] (The ruse of plausible deniability is the logic of the hidden contradiction, and such contradictions are the very stuff of homophobic discourse, as noted by a number of people, from David Halperin to Mark Jordan.) Similarly, violence is both refused and expected in the earlier text on homosexuality.

Indeed, it is incited, for the letter establishes the homosexual as uniquely oriented to sin, as a personage who endangers family and society and who should not be granted full human rights. Doing so – condoning and, indeed, protecting homosexual activity – is deemed a distorted and irrational behaviour.

Conceiving change through creative amnesia

However, we are enjoined to conceive change, to think how Catholic homophobia – which is Catholic culture and the discourses through which it is sustained – might change. Needless to say, this change is almost inconceivable. And I want to suggest how inconceivable it is by considering one area of discourse where some have – or hope to have – heard some change. This is in some of the pronouncements of Pope Francis, not least when he appeared to refrain from judging the lives of homosexual persons.[10] There appears to be a significant change in tone and attitude, a change from that of the pope's predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. And while the few comments on homosexuals in Francis's recent exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*), are negative, there is no repetition of the teaching from the 1980s. Might it then be that we are witnessing what Fergus Kerr has referred to as that creative amnesia by which the Church, over time, simply forgets those teachings that become unpalatable, impractical, unacceptable?[11]

But there are reasons to give us pause. First of all, Kerr invoked the idea of amnesia in regard to the forgetting of that long tradition which understood the *imago Dei* as our human rationality, a sharing in the divine reason. Though not denied, this tradition was effectively replaced – during the pontificate of John Paul II – by that of the nuptial mystery, the union of man and woman, as the image of God in humankind. Kerr, as a Dominican, was understandably perplexed by this forgetting of a largely Thomist tradition. But something more disturbing was happening in the shift from reason to heterosexual union, or the propensity for such union, as the marker of God in us, the marker of the human difference from all other animals. For while some might worry that the earlier tradition denied humanity to those thought irrational, such as the very young or the mentally disabled, the latter denies humanity to those with no orientation to heterosexual coupledom. Nuptial mysticism effectively renders the homosexual person less than fully human.[12]

Many have wanted to think of the *imago Dei* in terms of affection and relationality, of the human ability to give and receive love. And although this will no more separate us from

(some) other animals than does reason, it changes the way we think about what matters in human life. Nor need we think that head and heart, reason and affection, are so opposed, for as we say: the heart has its reasons. And in God, love and reason are not divided. But it is another matter to limit the *imago* to heterosexual affections, or rather – since God's love cannot be limited – to refuse to see the abundance of God's love, which is the refusal to see God. But then this is homophobic vision.

Writing in 1981, Michel Foucault noted that what truly affronts the homophobe is not gay sex, but gay affections. 'To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals begin to love one another – there's the problem.'[13] The unnatural or illegal act does not challenge the established modes of relationship, the rules of alliance and conveyance, the passage of women between men and the production of heirs; but '[t]he affirmation that to be a homosexual is for a man to love another man – this search for a way of life runs counter to the ideology of the sexual liberation movements of the sixties', as Foucault observed, and counter to the patriarchal ordering of Catholic culture, as we might observe today. 'Homosexuality,' Foucault continued, 'is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the "slantwise" position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.'[14]

And, of course, one such virtuality that has come to light is the possibility – and now the reality – in many countries of same-sex marriage, an establishment in law of affective same-sex relationships. For some this might seem the very opposite of what Foucault intended, seeing in same-sex marriage the triumph of heterosexuality over its destabilization by otherwise 'slantwise' relationships. Yet, for others, marriage is destroyed through its inclusion of same-sex couples: the fulfilment of homophobic fears. For John Milbank, all marriages are now gay marriages, since 'marriage' is no longer the name for heterosexual relationships issuing in progeny.[15] Foucault would seem to have been entirely right when he saw fear of love as the true mark of homophobia. And this is why the few remarks about homosexual relationships in Pope Francis's exhortation on the family are more significant than they seem at first. For the latter's insistence that 'there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family' bespeaks the fear of which Foucault wrote. In short, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*) is a homophobic text, constructing the family as

homophobic, in need of 'respectful pastoral guidance' when it is discovered that one or more of its members experiences 'same-sex attraction' or manifests a 'homosexual orientation' – a situation that is 'not easy for parents or for children'.[16]

Moreover, Francis has repeated on several occasions the critique of 'gender ideology' that began under his predecessor, an ideology that – in Pope Benedict's words – 'call[s] into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make[s] homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality'.[17] As noted by Judith Butler – whose work might be in view – Benedict's critique of gender theory is 'without citation', so that 'he is not beholden to any textual evidence in making his claims'.[18] But such slippage from any mooring in the object of critique is of a piece with the strategies of homophobic discourse, the practices of evasion, plausible deniability and self-contradiction that work to undermine any counter-critique.

Thus, most obviously, and weakly, the charge of ideology against gender theory serves to obscure the magisterium's own ideological location, which never admits to being a historically situated, contingent discourse, persuasive only through rhetoric. The refusal of citation renders the derided without voice, discourses that can never defend themselves because they are never clearly in view, and through that obscurity they are put at the mercy of their critics. Homophobic discourses, on the other hand, evade final comprehension through repeated self-contradiction. Catholic homophobic discourse affirms the dignity of the homosexual person while taking that dignity away; what can be read as a malicious text – the 1986 letter – deplores 'that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action' (§10).[19] As David Halperin notes, 'homophobic discourses are not reducible to a set of statements with a specifiable truth-content that can be rationally tested'.[20] Similarly, and more pertinently, Mark Jordan observes that many 'official Catholic documents … don't invite counterarguments because they don't really invite discussion'. They are, as he says, 'scripts for preventing serious speech by scrambling it'.[21] And it is this scrambling of speech that we continue to find under the present pontificate, in the discords between the ambiguous 'Who am I to judge?' and the unambiguous insistence that there is not even the remotest analogy between homosexual unions and marriage.[22] There is, we might say, a hermeneutic of continuity between the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, and this is why there is still much to be forgotten before we can imagine change through creative amnesia.

For some, homophobia is that discursive apparatus which produces the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual, just as misogyny produces the distinction between man and woman, when woman is the marked term, the deviation from the norm – from the truly human – which is the man. Similarly, the homosexual is the marked deviation from the normative and natural heterosexual, the one who does not need to give an account of himself (with that pronoun used advisedly). As I hope I have shown, this homophobic apparatus is not simply external to the Church, but integral. Catholicism is another name for homophobia, and this Catholic homophobia establishes the homosexual as not fully human and so not fully entitled to human rights. If we are to conceive change in this regard, we have to imagine more than the forgetting of the Church's teaching in the 1960s and 1980s, more than the forgetting of nuptial mysticism, more than the forgetting of synods on the family. We have to imagine a Church that forgets to think the distinctions between man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual, as these have been constituted; constituting the distinction between the fully human and the not quite human – the pitiful to whom mercy must be shown.

Author Biography

Gerard Loughlin is Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University.

Notes

[1] This article is a revised version of a paper given at a seminar on 'Conceiving Change in the Church', organized by the Australian Catholic University Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry and the Durham University Centre for Catholic Studies, held in Rome, September 2016.

[2] The clause was repealed in 2000.

[3] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: meditations on the Apostles' Creed* (New York: Crossroad, 1990 [1989]), p. 78.

[4] See Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[5] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (London: CTS, 1986), §3.

[6] See James Alison, 'The gay thing: following the still small voice' in *Queer Theology: rethinking the Western body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 50–62.

[7] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: towards a gay hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 32.

[8] Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae (On Human Life)* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1968), §12.

[9] See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: when is life grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016 [2009]), p. 120.

[10] See James Roberts, 'Pope directs Church towards an attitude of mercy', *The Tablet* 267.9009 (3 August 2013), pp. 31–2.

[11] See Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: from neoscholasticism to nuptial mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 217.

[12] See also Gerard Loughlin, 'Nuptial mysteries' in *Faithful Reading: new essays in theology in honour of Fergus Kerr*, ed. Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby and Tom O'Loughlin (London: T. & T. Clark), pp. 173–92.

[13] Michel Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life' in *Essential Woks of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley and others, 3 vols (London: Penguin Books, 2000 [1994]), *Vol. 1. Ethics: subjectivity and truth*, pp. 136–7; quoted in Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 308–9.

[14] Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', p. 138; Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, p. 309.

[15] See John Milbank, 'Culture: the gospel of affinity' in *Being Reconciled: ontology and pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 187–211, 230–2; and for a critique of Milbank in this regard, see Gerard Loughlin, '(Homosexual) bodies and the image of God' in *Making Humans: religious, technological and aesthetic perspectives*, ed. Alexander Darius Ornella (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2015), pp. 3–20.

[16] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), §250, p. 190.

[17] Cited in Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 118.

[18] Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 119, note 15.

[19] As Mark Jordan notes: 'The documents about homosexuality are so carelessly offensive, so casually violent, that they provoke many readers to fury. Rage is indeed an appropriate index to the rhetorical intensity of some of the documents. Any weaker reaction would be a

misreading.' Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: homosexuality in modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 23.

[20] Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, p. 32.

[21] Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: scandal, flesh, and Christian speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 14.

[22] See Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: a conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, translated by Oonagh Stransky (London: Bluebird Books, 2016), pp. 57–8; Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), §251, p. 190.